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THE MORAL
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THE MORAL UTILITY

OF A

LOCK HOSPITAL.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

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When the Lock Hospital at Kildare was opened, December 6th, 1869, the moral condition and general appearance and behaviour of the patients admitted, was enough to sadden and disgust, if not utterly discourage, the most patient and hopeful of those concerned in their improvement. These women were, with few exceptions, of that class for some time recognised in public reports, and otherwise, as "Curragh Wrens,"—a type of women it would be difficult to form any fair idea of, without personal observation of their appearance and habits. For the most part the very dregs of their degraded class, from all quarters of the Kingdom, congregated together in the vicinity of a great Military Camp, without house accommodation of any kind, with no recognised place of even casual admittance, except the lowest wayside public-house, or the workhouse. Their only shelter from summer sun or winter snows, the furze bushes on the common, or a few rude "Huts," which would disgrace the aborigines of any country. Plunged in habitual debauchery and drunkenness, need it be said they were shunned by all decent members of the community. The few clergymen, or others, whose Christian pity overcame their repugnance to approach their haunts, proved their attempts to do good, at this stage, to be useless. They found themselves addressing

beings whose senses seemed so deadened by intemperance, and all the conditions of their wild and vicious lives, that moral persuasion to them was like speaking in an unknown or forgotten language.

As year after year rolled on, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, habituated to the presence of these unfortunates, became more apathetic as to their actual condition, both physical and moral. Occasionally one heard of a death from violence, neglect, or accident; and once, at Christmas time, a poor "Wren" was found dead in the snow, a crust of bread in her hand, her body half-hidden inside an old roofless stable, to which she had crept for shelter the night before. For these things, when heard of, people felt a passing pang of natural pity, but all seemed to agree to speak of these abandoned women as a kind of dreadful and scandalous necessity, and as beings beyond the pale of human sympathy or help. As a sort of apology for this feeling it was frequently remarked that the youth of the neighbourhood of the humble class, and especially the female youth, were so far influenced by the habitual aspect of vice thus thrust on them, that they had lost at least that modest simplicity of conduct and appearance that distinguished them a dozen years before, and in but too many instances had outstepped the line that divided them from their wretched neighbours; but the older and wiser generation, or still more, those whose business it was to teach *them*, seemed to forget that their own apathy and want of active charity, may, in a great measure, have prepared the way for many of the evils which followed. To hate the sin, yet succour the sinner, is surely more in accordance with the Divine command, and if the presence of abandoned women in a locality be permitted or tolerated at all, it is difficult to see why it might not be right to assign them, in addition to necessary medical aid, human habitations, and a quarter to themselves, where they could not continually flaunt

their vices in the face of the general public. Indifference or wilful contempt and neglect had been tried long enough, without having the effect of diminishing the number of bad characters, or the frightful evils they wrought. Surely it was time to take a step in the right direction, and try what humanity, charity, and skill could do.

It was in something of this spirit the Government Hospital at Kildare was opened, in the midst of a great deal of ignorant prejudice, as well as honest and intelligent opinions, for and against the movement. Here the "Wrens" were compelled to enter, carrying with them, in addition to nameless diseases, their own peculiar manners, and a determination to adhere as far as possible to their own customs. Obedience to rule, cleanliness, order, respectful behaviour, employment, all that is comprised by civilized habits, and especially in public institutions, was step by step fought against by these women. The Lock Hospital regulations were found to be inadequate to enforce general obedience, partly because they were not constructed in view of such an exceptional class of women, and partly because their general indulgence and liberality were somewhat paradoxically regulated by the only real mode of punishment being made—committal to gaol on a Magistrate's order. This of course was only resorted to in extreme and aggravated cases; but for the almost hourly recurrence of minor offences, there seemed no remedy. The Hospital itself was not built with any view to imprisonment, and the patients could climb walls and gates with the greatest facility. This power they availed themselves of at every favourable opportunity, by getting on the roof or tops of walls, from whence they could hail the passers-by on the public roads, and by a hundred ingenious devices contrive to give annoyance to all within their reach. Most of them had never been in a place of worship since they fell *(except when in Gaol)*, many not for so long as seven, ten, and fourteen

years. Unused to medical treatment, only in exceptional cases, they resented it as a series of experiments made for the purpose of "tormenting them," or any purpose but their benefit Any kind of work was felt to be a grievous hardship not to be borne—nay, the fact of a roof over their heads with all its comfortable internal accompaniments, was a novel and unpleasant restraint; they would not take their meals at table; they would not attempt to keep their clothes or persons tidy; they would lie down and rise up almost as they pleased; they would address *anyone*, in or out of season, in their own language, and the more silent or civil ones often got soundly abused by the rest for their want of "spirit." All sense of respect for others, as well as shame for themselves, seemed dead in those unhappy beings; strangers to kindness or gentleness of manner, they thought it prompted by fear and acted accordingly. Unaccustomed above all to the presence of the respectable of their own sex, they were in turn abashed or insolent, sullen, or abusive, "everything by turns and nothing long."

At length the general forbearance of the officials was rewarded by observing a gradual change for the better, in proportion to the length and frequency of the patients living in Hospital. Perceiving that their treatment was at all times just and mild, that special kindness was accorded to the sick, and for any good behaviour; that their health was restored, and their general good at all times sought after, it dawned on their blunted faculties that it might be best to behave themselves. Seeing they could neither intimidate nor irritate those placed over them, and that pity and persuasion were the chief or only weapons used against them, they began to feel confidence in, and respect for their rulers; and this feeling once established, it was curious to observe how rapidly it gained strength. The ice of their acquired feelings once broken through, the early

natural characteristics of each individual flowed at once to the surface ; a thousand little traits of good feeling were quickly discovered ; and above all, the slumbering embers of religious faith were seized on and nursed to the utmost. One remarkable quality they seemed to maintain almost universally (an encouraging sign that their hearts were not utterly corrupted), viz.—kindness to each other in sickness; no one, even the worst, ever refused to nurse or perform any office for a sick patient, and many a well-born and virtuous lady might take a lesson in tenderness from a poor despised "Wren," if she saw how gently a sick or dying *stranger's* head would be laid on her breast.

By degrees these women have been educated into something like order. They have grown (with few exceptions) to appreciate their treatment. They have ceased to curse or use any bad language, except when under the influence of passion, which is now happily more rare; they are all learning the decencies of life in manner and appearance, and as a rule obey the regulations fairly. They have learned to knit and sew, and do it well; in some instances these were only forgotten arts, but the majority were obliged to be taught the rudiments, and on the whole, took to it patiently enough. They seem to take an actual pride in keeping the Hospital clean and orderly ; many of them in this way get no small amount of training into the knowledge of a general servant. While outside their lives are apparently the same, numbers now seek admission into the Hospital and are sorry to leave, even the more hardened ones are ashamed to show any exultation—if they feel it—on being discharged. Above all, for which every Christian must thank God, some have died repentant, thankfully accepting the consolations of religion, and some have gone their several ways to other countries, friends or institutions, with such help, material and moral, as the Hospital could afford them. Wise persons—

wise with wisdom of the world—may doubt their sincerity or their perseverance, (and it is not denied that both may meet in many cases with trials too great for their weakness.) Would it not be better for such doubters, if they cannot add their conscientious mite of help towards a system which at all events, *starts* these hitherto friendless outcasts on an honest path—starts them too with the great boon of recovered health, to let their own sense and foresight originate some plan of reformation more complete and more extensive than any at present within reach.

Reformatories in Ireland for fallen women do not, as a rule, meet their requirements. Nearly all that are in existence (and the number is sadly too small) are founded by religious orders, and some few other sources of private benevolence, and must, of necessity, be made self-supporting by any immediate means within reach, the chief of which appears to be laundry work. No connection of any account is made or maintained with institutions for providing servants, establishments for the sale of needlework or knitting, or emigration schemes. The interests of the asylum are generally local and restricted, and local and restricted they remain. Thus, they cannot fairly be called Reformatories. A Reformatory, as we take it, means a place where the inmates are not only morally reformed, but where they are fitted to earn their bread according to their various capabilities, and to return to the world, making way for others in the same need who come after. The Irish Reformatories are, in fact, generally Magdalen Asylums, admirable of their kind, and admirably managed, chiefly by religious sisterhoods, where a necessarily limited number of penitents are kindly welcomed, and charitably treated; where they may remain till they die, if they wish ; where their work must contribute to their support, and outside of which they can have no hope or interest in life. This is not

encouraging to the mass of fallen women who desire to reform. In the first degrees of their repentance especially, when burdened with many of the habits contracted in the terrible past, they enter on an unknown and untried future, it is with a natural human yearning that eventually they may be able to return to that respectable place in the world which they had forfeited; and it must be confessed that even if desirable to keep large numbers of able working women in asylums, with a view only to lives of penitential retirement, it is not practicable to any great extent.

A Reformatory, to be really such, should be on a comprehensive scale, made partly, if not wholly, self-supporting, by the industry of the inmates, yet with enough of the spirit of self-interest infused in their labour to brighten it with the hope of individual reward, after a period of trying probation; hence, the employment should be suited to the capabilities of the woman, and such as she would be likely to adopt successfully, as a means of living. Washing and laundry work ought not to be the chief business taught in the institution; knitting, crochet, embroidery, and especially dressmaking, and the various useful kinds of plain sewing which women are required to do, should be carried on, and by these means the delicately-reared but fallen shop-girl, and other such will not (by being compelled to labour at work beyond her strength) be discouraged and overpowered in the commencement of her new career. Monotony would be avoided also, while each would contribute her fair share, in her own way, to the general support. Besides, too, trades, situations, emigration, every scheme that encourages the honest business of life should be sought after, and united with moral reform. Such an institution, well worked, supplemental to Lock Hospitals, (and one would suffice for the needs of several,) would be likely, under Providence, to reap a golden harvest of thorough and sound reformation.

To the establishment and support of such, or similar plans; to raise a lost and fallen and too numerous class, we venture to appeal to the charity and common sense of every thinking person; we earnestly crave the aid of every virtuous woman, and especially of that large and influential circle of ladies who, in most painfully mistaken zeal, have undertaken to oppose the Contagious Disease's Act, the full understanding of which lies as much outside their province as the gentler charities of life lie within.

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